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In Retreat

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IN RETREAT

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IN RETREAT

BY

HERBERT READ

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TO

THE GREEN HOWARDS

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INTRODUCTION

It is now seven years since the incidents here related took place, and six years since I wrote down this account. I had preserved, rather by accident than by design, a bundle of messages and field-maps connected with the Retreat, and it occurred to me, in the Spring of 1919, that here was circumstantial evidence of a kind which, despite the immensity of the war, was little likely to be preserved. My memory of the events associated with these relics was yet vivid enough to give them a real connection, and this I set myself to do. One thing I wished to avoid, and that was any personal interpretation of the events—any expatiation, that is to say, whether of the imagination or of the intellect. I wanted the events to speak for themselves unaided by any art.

I tried to publish this short narrative as soon as I had written it; and in this effort I received encouragement and advice from one whose name should have been sufficient to remove many obstacles. But the state of the public mind, or at least, of that mind as localised in the minds of publishers and editors, refused anything so bleak. The war was still a sentimental illusion: it was a subject for pathos, for platitude, even for rationalisation. It was not yet time for the simple facts.

I then resolved to put the narrative away for five years and see what change came over the public mind, or my mind too, in that interval.

Personally I find myself receding from the stern oath of realism I took when in the midst of war; receding, too, from whatever bitterness I then felt against the charlatans

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who proferred their vicarious interpretations of our experience. I still feel some bitterness that so little that is effectual should have been recorded of the reality; and most bitter, perhaps, at certain states of forgetfulness in the minds of non-combatants. But I have nothing to say—no desire to say anything—on that aspect of the turn of events. I have grown to think that whatever is effected by the written word must be effected on the plane of imagination and thought.

But these cannot subsist without logical roots in experience. And meanwhile there is historic truth—a necessary science; and this transcript of experience is designed to that end. It does not pretend to be more than a very small fragment of the history of the war; but *in full* that history will never be written.

H. R.

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IN RETREAT

A JOURNAL OF THE RETREAT OF THE FIFTH ARMY FROM ST. QUENTIN, MARCH 1918.

. . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning, its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone. . . .

JOSEPH CONRAD.

I

WE received the warning order just before dinner, and for awhile talked excitedly round the mess fire, some scoffing at the idea of an imminent battle, others gravely saying that this time at any rate the warning was justified. Two deserters, with tales of massing guns and the night-movement of innumerable troops, had reached our lines the previous day. Of course, deserters usually had some such tale designed to tempt a captor's leniency, but this time it was likely to be the truth. What else could the enemy's long silence mean? To that question we had no answer. We went early to bed, expecting an early awakening. The harnessed horses stood in lowered shafts.

There was scarcely a wall standing in Fluquières: everywhere demolition and bombardment had reduced the village to irregular cairns of brick and plaster. Winding among these cairns were the cleared roadways. Men and horses rested in patched sheds and an occasional cellar. S. and I were in a small repaired stable, each with a bed-

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frame in a manger. I had livened the cleanly white-washed walls of the place with illustrations from a coloured magazine. That evening all save our trench-kit had been sent to the transport-waggons, and we were lying on the bare netting with only our trench coats thrown over us.

For some time I was too excited to sleep, and none too warm. But weariness did at length triumph, and when, a short while afterwards, I was roughly awakened, I had become unconscious enough to forget the continuity of things.

II

Yes: suddenly I was awake. A match was being applied to the candle stuck on the bed-frame above my head. With his excited face illumined by the near candle-light, an orderly bent over me and shook my shoulders. I heard confused shoutings, and the rumble of gunfire. I had hardly need to read the message-form held out to me: "Man Battle Stations"—the code words I knew only too well, and all that they implied. I was shivering violently with the cold, but in the shaking candle-light I scribbled messages repeating the code to the company commanders, the transport officer, and to others. S. was moving on the other side of the wall that divided the mangers.

"We're in for it, my lad," he yelled, above the increasing din.

Just then there was the sudden shrieking rush of a descending shell and its riotous detonation very near. Our candles jumped out, and we were in darkness, with bricks and earth falling like a hail on the roof. My servant came in, and hastily helped me to gather my equipment together. He handled the two or three books I always carried with me, asking me if I would take one in my pocket. I took Thoreau's *Walden*, because I had not

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yet read it, and anticipated two or three weary days of passive defence. For even if now we realised the actuality of the enemy's attack, so confident were we of our defensive system that we contemplated nothing more than a short successful resistance. When in the front line we had ceaselessly reconnoitred all approaches, and so fine were the sweeping fields of fire that stretched away towards St. Quentin, so skilfully placed were our machine-guns, that always we pitied the folly of the enemy should he assail a defence so deadly. We reckoned with one factor unseen.

I fixed my revolver and ammunition securely, and set out to the orderly room, some five hundred yards away. It was now about five o'clock and still dark. I picked my way along a path which led across the great heaps of rubble. Shells were falling in the village. I still shivered with cold. My electric torch was nearly exhausted, so that I kept falling as I went. When I reached the orderly room, which was in a restored cottage, I found everything in a great hubbub, orderlies coming and going, the sergeant-major shouting orders. Inside the doctor was bandaging a wounded man.

S., who had been assembling the headquarter staff, came to say that something terrible had happened to the Lewis team (at that time a Lewis-gun team was attached to each battalion headquarters): would I come round with my torch.

They had been sleeping, some six men, beneath tarpaulin sheets, stretched across a half-demolished out-house. A shell had fallen in the middle of them. In the weak glare of my torch, we saw a mangled mass of red brick-dust and of red glistening blood. Here and there we distinguished a tousled head of hair. One man, pinned beneath beams and brickwork, was still groaning. We quickly began to extricate him, but he died whilst we worked.

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I then joined the colonel, and with one or two orderlies and the sergeant-major we followed the companies along the back lane that led from Fluquières to Roupy, a distance of about a mile and a half. The morning was cold and a heavy dew lay on the ground. As we walked the light of dawn began to reveal a thick wet mist.

III

At 6.50 I sent a message to the brigade, informing them that the battalion was in position. We had been shelled all along the way, and when we neared Roupy, the cross-roads seemed to be under a continuous barrage. Nevertheless, we got into position with very few casualties. Safe in the bowels of the headquarter dugout, we thought the worst was over, and began casually to eat the tongue-sandwiches and drink the tea provided by the mess-corporal.

The dugout was new and spacious, and odorous of the fresh chalky earth. It was about thirty feet deep, and partitioned into three sections, of which the middle one was occupied by the headquarter officers. Because it was new it was unfurnished, and we had to squat on the bare floor, grouped round a few candles.

For me that cavern is a telephonic nightmare. The instrument, a " D III converted," was placed on the floor in a corner of the dugout. Two signallers sat with their legs straddling round it. At first the companies, then the neighbouring battalions, and, finally, the brigade, kept me there crouching on the floor, yelling till I was hoarse into the execrable instrument. When I was not speaking, the signallers were receiving or sending Morse messages.

Above the ground, the situation was disquieting. The thick mist of the early dawn persisted : a man ten yards away could not be distinguished. The gunfire, tremendous in its intensity, continued hour after hour to

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pound into the invisible foreground. The earth vibrated almost hysterically. An occasional shell crashed near us, but after the first three hours (at 7.30) the enemy's fire seemed to be concentrated on our front-line defences. No messages, telephonic or written, came to relieve our anxiety.

The gradual accumulation of our anxiety should be realised. Every minute seemed to add to its intensity. By ten o'clock or so, our hearts were like taut drum skins beaten reverberantly by every little incident.

Then the skin smashed. Bodily action flickered like flame. The sense of duration was consumed away.

Shortly after eleven o'clock, a gun team galloped madly down the main road. Then two stragglers belonging to the Machine-Gun Corps were brought to headquarters. They informed us that the front line had been penetrated. Later, an officer from the front-line battalion, with five or six men, came to us out of the mist. Most of the party were wounded, and as the officer's leg was being bandaged in the dugout, he told us his tale. He was haggard and incoherent, but the sequence was awfully clear to us. The enemy had attacked in great strength at 7.30. They had apparently reached the observation line unobserved, and overpowered the few men there before a warning could be given or an escape made. Advancing under cover of a creeping barrage, they had approached the main line of defence. No fire met them there, or only fire directed vaguely into the fog. The fight at the main line had been short and bloody. Our men, dazed and quivering after three hours' hellish bombardment (I could see them cowering on the cold mist-wet earth), had been brave to the limits of heroism; but pitifully powerless. The ghastly job had been completed by 8.30. About nine o'clock fresh enemy battalions passed through their fellows and advanced towards the front-line redoubt (L'Épine de Dallon). Our artillery fire must have been

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useless by then, still falling on the old enemy front line. At any rate, the enemy quickly surrounded the redoubt, and then penetrated it. This officer himself had been captured, and later had made his escape in the mist. He thought it possible that the headquarters of his battalion were still holding out.

We were still questioning our informant when an excited voice yelled down the dugout shaft: "Boches on the top of the dugout." Our hearts thumped. There was no reason why the enemy shouldn't be on us. They might have been anywhere in that damned mist. We drew our revolvers and rushed to the shaft. We did not mean to be caught like rats in a hole.

I remember my emotion distinctly: a quiet despair. I *knew* I went up those stairs either to be shot or bayoneted, as I emerged, or, perhaps, to be made prisoner and so plunge into a strange unknown existence.

Half-way up the stairs, and a voice cried down: "It's all right: they're our fellows." Some artillerymen in overcoats, straggling across the open, had looked sinister in the mist.

We turned to the dugout, the released tension leaving us exhausted.

Patrols from our front companies had been feeling outward all morning, at first without result. At 12.30 B. (commanding the left front company) reported: "Machine-gun and rifle-fire on left and right can be heard. Shelling very hard. Can see nothing. Patrols are being sent out." At 1 p.m. he reported: "Boche are in quarry just in front of me. We are firing Lewis guns and rifles at him. He seems to be firing from our right flank too, with machine-guns."

These and other messages all came by runner. The telephonic communications to the companies had broken down before noon, though I think we remained in touch with the brigade until late in the afternoon.

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About midday the mist began to clear a little. At one o'clock the enemy, having massed in the valley five hundred yards immediately in front of us, attacked in mass strength. The fusillade that met them must have been terrific. They came on in good order, extending and manœuvring with precision. At 1.20 B. reported: "No. 5 Platoon report enemy on wire in front. Artillery assistance is asked for. We are firing rifle grenades into them." And again at 1.30: "Boche attacking in strength with sections in front. Front troops are in valley in front. They are also heading to my left flank." Between 1.30 and 1.40 the attack reached its greatest intensity. By 1.45 it had withered completely before the hail of our fire.

At 1.45 B. reported: "Boche running back like hell near Savy. They seem to be running from artillery as much as anything." (Savy was one and a half miles to our left front: it was on the slope that rose away from the valley in front of us where the enemy had massed his forces before his attack.)

For a moment we became elated. There was cause enough. The mist had lifted, and a pale sun shone. We had defeated a strong attack. We received a message from the Inniskillings on our right to say they still held their positions intact. And wider afield the co-ordination of the enemy's advance seemed to have broken down.

We made haste to distribute our reserve ammunition, to clear the dressing-station, and generally to make ourselves ready for the next happenings.

In reply to my inquiries B. sent this message, timed 2.15 p.m.: "It is very difficult to tell numbers of enemy. I can see the ground north to Savy, and saw them scattered. The line advancing had about 30 men to every 100 yards. We do not require S.A.A. yet. Can you instruct Rose [1] to fire up Soup Valley, please? We

[1] Code name for a company.

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will want Very lights for the night. Will a supply be forthcoming? Can see no movement now. Boche is putting up white lights all along valley."

IV

The lull was not of long duration. Either we had been deceived by the movements near Savy, or the enemy had made a miraculously swift recovery. At 2.45 I received another message from B.: "Enemy movement at F. 12 at 4.0. They appear to be carrying in wounded. Enemy also advancing across valley on left on F. 5, in small parties. Estimated total strength seen, 50 men. Boche aeroplanes are flying about 300 feet above our lines, and have been for a short while past. There is still some machine-gun fire in front. Is a redoubt holding out?"

The aeroplanes were evidently making a preliminary reconnaissance, and I guessed the movement to be significant of a new attack.

On the mists clearing, the aeroplanes were able to sight position, and soon the artillery on both sides became active. Our own artillery, alas, fired short, smashing our already weakened defences. The Germans brought up their light field guns with great skill and rapidity. Several batteries were observed coming over the ridge at L'Épine de Dallon—only a few hours ago the headquarters of the battalion we were supporting. We now realised our position in earnest, and I sent a detailed account of the situation to the brigade.

Towards four o'clock, the enemy shelling increased in intensity. The second attack was now imminent. B. sent the following message, timed 4.30 p.m.: "Boche is attacking on right about 400 strong, and is massing in the valley right in front of Roupy. We want some more S.A.A. During the Boche retreat the riflemen and Lewis guns did good work, killing many. Shelling very heavy."

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The heavy shelling continued, and under cover of its intensity the enemy again massed in the valley in front of us. The men held on grimly. Thus B., timed 5.10 p.m.: "Line holding still with some casualties. Reports not in. Line heavily shelled. S.A.A. received correct. Situation still the same. Touch is being kept with battalion on our right, and patrols go constantly. (Our chloride of lime is missing and cannot be found.) Machine-guns very active." And again at 5.40 p.m.: "The Boche is 50 yards or less from our line, and is also passing down the valley for another attack."

Then suddenly those massed men leapt from cover, and came on in their grey, regular formations. At headquarters we were only aware of the angry surge of rifle and machine-gun fire, deadening even the detonations of shells. All this time I was spending tiring, exasperating hours at the telephone, striving to get in communication with brigade and artillery headquarters. Again and again the wire was broken, and again and again the linesmen went out into the mist to mend it. Then it got disconnected irreparably. We were isolated in that chaos.

About 6.30 B. sent the following momentous message: "Boche got inside our wire on right and left. No. 5 Platoon are all either wiped out or prisoners. No. 7 Platoon took up position on left of keep, but Boche were in it when I left. They also were in trench on right of road left by C. Company, and we killed several on road near camouflage. I am now in redoubt with 25 men."

The climax had come. We had still one card to play—the counter-attack company. On receipt of B.'s message, the colonel decided to order C. to attack in accordance with the preconceived plan.

We only heard of this counter-attack from the mouths of a few survivors. It was one of the most heroic episodes in the retreat. The company gathered together in the

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shell-battered trench that they had occupied all day, and then took the open. No artillery covered their advance. It was hopeless, insane, suicidal. They had perhaps one hundred and fifty yards to cover. They advanced at a jog-trot, lumbering on the uneven ground. One by one they fell before the fusillade that met them. C. had reached the enemy with about a dozen men. These leapt in among the Boches, and a hand-to-hand struggle ensued for a few minutes. C. was last seen cursing, pinned to the trench wall by a little mob of Germans, in one hand his empty smoking revolver.

V

It was now dusk, and with dusk came peace and silence. And at dusk this was our position :—The front rim of the redoubt was in the enemy's possession. The counter-attack company had disappeared. The company-keeps still held out with a few men in each. The inner ring of the redoubt was held by one company, and the remnants of three. B. had survived with one of his officers. But several officers in the three front companies had been either killed, wounded, or captured. There were probably two hundred men still surviving in the battalion.

In the darkness the colonel and I walked up to the line. As we went along the road, the stillness was abruptly broken by the sounds of three or four shots, screams and curses. We flung ourselves on the roadside, our revolvers ready. We shouted: "Who goes there?" English voices answered, and the sergeant-major went to investigate. Two German privates had walked into a sentry on the road, *coming from behind us*. No one could understand what they said, and they were sent back to brigade headquarters. And I don't remember that any one of us was perturbed by the incident, eerie though it was.

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Just after one o'clock in the day, we received long-awaited instructions from the brigade: The battalion in reserve was to deliver a counter-attack. The line of deployment was given, and the direction of attack. The battalion was to leave its position at 12.45, and the guns were to start a creeping barrage at 1.33 a.m.

The whole thing was a ghastly failure. The night was black, and the battalion attacking was unfamiliar with the ground it had to cover. We waited hours for a sign of their approach. About two o'clock a stray officer came to us, having lost his company. Eventually, about four o'clock, one company did appear. It went forward in the darkness, but got dispersed and uncontrollable in the effort to deploy into attack formation. Dawn found us as dusk had found us, with the sole difference that some two hundred men of the counter-attack battalion had found refuge in our redoubt, and in the keeps in front.

I think by then we were past hope or despair. We regarded all events with an indifference of weariness, knowing that with the dawn would come another attack. We distributed ammunition, reorganised our Lewis guns, and waited dully, without apprehension.

Again the morning was thickly misty. Our own artillery fire was desultory and useless. Under cover of the mist, the enemy massed in battle formation, and the third attack commenced about 7 a.m. We only heard a babel in the mist. Now our artillery was firing short among our men in the redoubt. About ten o'clock the enemy penetrated our left flank, presumably in the gap between us and the battalion on our left, which was still in position. Machine-gun fire began to harass us from that direction, somewhere in the ruins of the village. We never heard from the battalion on our right, and a runner I sent there did not return. I think they must have withdrawn about ten o'clock.

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This new attack petered out. I fancy it was only half-hearted on the part of the enemy—probably only a demonstration to see if we intended to make a determined resistance, or to fight only a rearguard action. Finding the resistance determined enough, they evidently retired to prepare the real thing.

This fourth attack was delivered about midday. The mist still persisted thinly. One could perhaps see objects fifty yards away. I don't know what resistance the platoon-keeps offered. They were in a hopeless position, and would easily have been swamped in a mass attack.

Shortly after midday, the enemy came in direct contact with the inner ring of the redoubt.

We fired like maniacs. Every round of ammunition had been distributed. The Lewis guns jammed; rifle bolts grew stiff and unworkable with the expansion of heat.

In the lull before noon, the colonel and I had left the dugout, in which we were beginning to feel like rats in a trap, and had found an old gun-pit about two hundred and fifty yards further back, and here we established our headquarters. An extraordinary thing happened. The gun-pit was dug out of the bank on the roadside. About two o'clock one of our guns, evidently assuming that Roupy had been evacuated, began to pound the road between Roupy and Fluquières. One of these shells landed clean on the road edge of our pit. We were all hurled to the ground by the explosion, but, on recovering ourselves, found only one casualty: the colonel had received a nasty gash in the forearm. We then went two hundred to three hundred yards across the open, away from the road, and found a smaller overgrown pit. The colonel refused to regard his wound as serious; but he soon began to feel dizzy, and was compelled to go back to the dressing-station. I was then left in charge of the battalion.

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It was now about 2.30. The attack still persisted in a guerilla fashion. But the enemy was massing troops in the trenches already taken. At 4 p.m. the intensity of the attack deepened suddenly. A new intention had come into the enemy's mind: he was directing his attack on the flanks of our position in an effort to close round us like pincers. On the left he made use of cover offered by the ruined village, and eventually brought machine-guns to bear against us from our left rear. On the right he made use of the trenches evacuated by the Inniskillings.

In the height of this attack, while my heart was heavy with anxiety, I received a message from the brigade. Surely reinforcements were coming to our aid? Or was I at length given permission to withdraw? Neither: it was a rhetorical appeal to hold on to the last man. I rather bitterly resolved to obey the command.

Another hour passed. The enemy pressed on relentlessly with a determined, insidious energy, reckless of cost. Our position was now appallingly precarious. I therefore resolved to act independently, and do as perhaps I should have done hours earlier. I ordered B. to organise a withdrawal. This message despatched, I lay on my belly in the grass and watched through my field-glasses every minute trickling of the enemy's progress. Gradually they made way round the rim of the redoubt, bombing along the traverses. And now we only held it as lips might touch the rim of a saucer. I could see the heads of my men, very dense and in a little space. And on either side, incredibly active, gathered the grey helmets of the Boches. It was like a long bowstring along the horizon, and our diminished forces the arrow to be shot into a void. A great many hostile machine-guns had now been brought up, and the plain was sprayed with hissing bullets. They impinged and spluttered about the little pit in which I crouched.

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I waited anxiously for B. to take the open. I saw men crawl out of the trenches, and lie flat on the parados, still firing at the enemy. Then, after a little while, the arrow was launched. I saw a piteous band of men rise from the ground, and run rapidly towards me. A great shout went up from the Germans: a cry of mingled triumph and horror. "Halt Eenglisch!" they cried, and for a moment were too amazed to fire; as though aghast at the folly of men who could plunge into such a storm of death. But the first silent gasp of horror expended, then broke the crackling storm. I don't remember in the whole war an intenser taste of hell. My men came along spreading rapidly to a line of some two hundred yards length, but bunched here and there. On the left, by the main road, the enemy rushed out to cut them off. Bayonets clashed there. Along the line men were falling swiftly as the bullets hit them. Each second they fell, now one crumpling up, now two or three at once. I saw men stop to pick up their wounded mates, and as they carried them along, themselves get hit and fall with their inert burdens. Now they were near me, so I rushed out of my pit and ran with them to the line of trenches some three hundred yards behind.

It seemed to take a long time to race across those few hundred yards. My heart beat nervously, and I felt infinitely weary. The bullets hissed about me, and I thought: then this is the moment of death. But I had no emotions. I remembered having read how in battle men are hit, and never feel the hurt till later, and I wondered if I had yet been hit. Then I reached the line. I stood petrified, enormously aghast. *The trench had not been dug, and no reinforcements occupied it.* It was as we had passed it on the morning of the 21st, the sods dug off the surface, leaving an immaculately patterned "mock" trench. A hundred yards on the right a machine-gun corps had taken up a position, and was already covering

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our retreat. I looked about me wildly, running along the line and signalling to the men to drop as they reached the slender parapet of sods. But the whole basis of my previous tactics had been destroyed. I should never have ordered my men to cross that plain of death, but for the expectation that we were falling back to reinforce a new line. We found an empty mockery, and I was in despair. But I must steady the line. On the actual plain the men obeyed my signals, and crouched in the shallow trench. But even as they crouched, the bullets struck them. On the road, the straight white road leading to the western safety, there was something like a stampede. S. and the sergeant-major went and held it with pointed revolvers. But it was all useless—hopeless. On the right, I saw the enemy creeping round. They would soon enfilade us, and then our shallow defence would be a death-trap. I accordingly gave the signal to withdraw, bidding the two Lewis guns to cover us as long as possible. Once more we rose and scattered in retreat. It would be about seven hundred yards to the next trenches—the village line round Fluquières, and this we covered fairly well, sections occasionally halting to give covering fire. The enemy had not yet ventured from the redoubt, and our distance apart was now great enough to make his fire of little effect. And I think as we moved up the slope towards the village we must have been in "dead" ground, so far as the enemy advancing on the right was concerned.

We reached Fluquières, which lay on the top of the slope, and found there some deep trenches on each side of the road at the entrance of the village. Further to the left, I found certain London troops commanded by a major. One of my Lewis guns still remained intact, and this I placed to fire down the straight road to Roupy. The enemy had now left the redoubt and were advancing in line formation.

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We were at Fluquières about an hour. The enemy evidently did not intend to rest content with his capture of the redoubt. It was just beginning to get dusk. Earlier we had noticed sporadic contact lights go up. But now they shot into the sky from all along the plain. Low-flying aeroplanes hovered over the advancing line, and their wireless messages soon put the German guns on to us. Big black high-explosive shells began to fall on our position, making our tired flesh shudder. I now began to be amazed at the advancing contact lights. They did not merely stretch in a line *in front of us: they encircled us like a horse-shoe, the points of which seemed* (and actually were) *miles behind us.* On the right the enemy was enfilading us with machine-gun fire.

I searched for the major commanding the troops on my left, but could not find him. By this time I was determined to act, and therefore gave the order to withdraw. The men filed through the village, gathering fresh ammunition from a dump at the cross-roads. From the village the road went up a slope leading to Aubigny. The enemy's fire soon followed us, and we proceeded along the ditches on each side of the road.

Three-quarters of the way up the slope I observed a trench running at right angles to the road on each side of it. I ordered the London men to go to the left, my own to the right, there to reorganise into companies. The twilight was now fairly deep, and I thought that with evening the enemy's advance would stay. The major I had seen in Fluquières now appeared again, and cursed me for giving the order to retire. I was too tired to argue, and even then a gust of machine-gun fire swept above our heads. They were going to attack again. We could hear them moving in the semi-darkness. Something else we could hear too—the throb of a motor-cycle behind us. It was a despatch rider, and when he drew level to us, he stopped his machine and came towards me

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with a message. I opened it. It ordered all troops east of the Aubigny defences to retire through Ham.

I was glad. I believe I thought then that it was the end of our share in the battle. I went to the men, and assembled them in companies, and in close artillery formation we retired across country due west. We came to the Aubigny defences, manned by fresh troops, about a mile further on, and then we gathered on the road again and marched wearily along. I remember coming to a water-tank, where we all drank our fill—our mouths were swollen with thirst. When we reached Ham, an officer met us and ordered us to proceed to Muille Villette, about two miles further on, and there billet for the night. Ham, as we walked through its cobbled streets, seemed very hollow and deserted. The last time we had seen it, it had been a busy market-town, full of civilians. Now only a few sinister looters went about the empty houses with candles. We saw one fellow come out of a door with a lady's reticule and other things over his arm. We should have been justified in shooting him, but we were far too tired. We just noticed him stupidly.

The road seemed long, and our pace was slow, but at last we reached the village of Muille Villette. We found it full of artillerymen and a few infantry. Every available shelter seemed to be occupied, but at length we got the men into a school. Our transport had been warned of our station for the night, and turned up with bully-beef and biscuits. These we served out.

I had four officers left with me. We could not find a billet for ourselves, but finally begged for shelter in a barn occupied by artillerymen. They looked on us unsympathetically, not knowing our experiences. On a stove one of them was cooking a stew of potatoes and meat, and its savour made us lusting beasts. But the artillerymen ate the slop unconcernedly, while we lay down too utterly weary to sleep, languidly chewing bully-beef.

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VI

It was after midnight when we came to Muille Villette; I suppose about 2 a.m. we fell into an uneasy sleep. At 4 a.m. we were awakened by the stirrings and shoutings of the artillerymen. I drew my long boots on my aching feet; and went out into the cold darkness. I found an officer of some kind. The enemy were reported to have attacked and penetrated the Aubigny defences, and to be now advancing on Ham. All the troops stationed in Muille Villette had received orders to withdraw.

We assembled the men, stupid with sleep. I knew that brigade headquarters were stationed at Golancourt, a mile and a half along the road. I resolved to proceed there and ask for orders. We marched away while the dawn was breaking.

I found the brigade established in a deserted house. T., the brigade-major, was seated on a bed lacing his boots. No orders for the brigade had yet been received, so T. advised me to find billets for the men, where they could rest and get food. The companies then sought billets independently, and, what was more blessed than anything, we managed to get them hot tea. I went and had breakfast with the brigade staff. The tea revived me, and I remember how voracious I felt, and that I tried to hide this fact. The brigadier came into the room and seemed very pleased to see me: apparently he was very satisfied with our conduct, and especially with the frequent reports I had sent back. Till then I had only felt weariness and bafflement—even shame. But now I began to see that we were implicated in something immense—something beyond personal feelings and efforts.

The brigadier told me as much as he knew of the general situation. It was not much. The communications had apparently broken down. But it was enough

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to make me realise that more than a local attack was in progress: the whole of the Fifth Army was involved: but there were no limits to what *might* be happening.

I also learnt that Dury—where the divisional headquarters had been stationed—a village some five or six miles south-*west* of Roupy, had been captured about two o'clock on the afternoon of the 22nd, several hours before we had evacuated the redoubt. Only a miracle of chance had saved us from being cut off.

The brigade seemed to have difficulty in getting into touch with the division, or, at any rate, in obtaining orders from them. But at 10 a.m. I was told to march to Freniches and await orders there. We assembled in the village street and marched on again. The road was busy with retreating artillery and a few infantrymen. From behind us came the sounds of firing: the enemy were attacking Ham. We trudged on, passing villages whose inhabitants were only just taking steps to flee. They piled beds, chairs, and innumerable bolsters on little carts, some hand-pulled, some yoked to bony horses. They tied cows behind. There were old men, many old women, a few young women, but no young men. They and their like proceeded with us along the western road.

We had gone perhaps five miles when an orderly on horseback overtook us with orders. We were to report to the —th Division at Freniches.

This we eventually did, and a fat staff colonel studied a map, and then told me to take my battalion to Esmery-Hallon, a village four miles due north, and there take up a defensive position. This was more than I expected. I explained that my men had been fighting continuously for forty-eight hours, and were beaten and spiritless. But I received no comfort: the situation demanded that every available man should be used to the bitter end. I hardly dared to face my men: but I think they were

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too tired to mind where they went. We turned off at a right angle, and slowly marched on. The road led through a beautiful patch of country, steeped in a calm, liquid sunshine. We tilted our bodies forward, and forced our weary muscles to act.

About two miles south of Esmery-Hallon, an officer (a lieutenant) appeared on a motor-cycle. He was in command of a scrap lot—transport men, cobblers, returned leave men, etc. He seemed to have the impression that the enemy were upon us, and wanted me to deploy and take up a position facing east. I explained that we were much too tired to do any such thing. He expostulated. Did I realise this, that, and the other? I explained that I had cause to realise such things better than he did. He raved. I told him finally that I didn't care a damn, but that I had orders to defend Esmery-Hallon, and thither I must go. He went off in a rage, seeming incredibly silly and fussy to us all.

Esmery-Hallon is a small village perched on a detached conical hill, overlooking the plain on all sides. The defence was simply arranged. Two companies of engineers were entrenched in front of the village. I sent a lookout on to the top of the church tower, and extended my men astraddle the hill on each side of the village, north and south. The men on the south found a ditch, which made an admirable trench. The men on the north extended over the ploughed land, and dug shallow pits for shelter. We had no machine-guns or Lewis guns, but every man had a rifle and a decent amount of ammunition. I established my headquarters on the north side by a quarry, where I had a wide view of the plain.

The day was very still, and the distant rattle of machine-gun fire carried to us. A few enemy shells fell ineffectively about the landscape. I got into touch with a major of the Inniskillings in command of one hundred and fifty men on my right, and we co-ordinated defences on

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that wing. My left wing was in the air, so to speak—not a soul visible for miles.

When our dispositions were finally made, I returned to the quarry edge. My servant T. had already been away to search the village, and now came laden with samples of red wine and cider which he had found in a cellar. So I sent him back to the village with other men, telling them to search for food also. They soon returned with bottles of red wine and a large tin of army biscuits. Evidently there was any amount of wine, but I was afraid to distribute it among the men for fear lest on fasting stomachs it should make them drunk. So S. and I each took a wine glass, and starting at different points, we began to go a round of the men. Each man lay curled up in his shallow pit, resting. To each we gave a glass of wine and a few biscuits. They took it thankfully. There was a lull in the distant fighting: I don't remember any noise of fire during that hour. The sun was warm and seemed to cast a golden peace on the scene. A feeling of unity with the men about me suddenly suffused my mind.

VII

It was nearly two o'clock when we got settled. About this time I interrupted a message which gave me the useful information that the enemy had been seen in Ham at 10 a.m. I guessed that the silence meant they were now consolidating along the Somme Canal. Later in the afternoon a cavalry patrol trotted up to our position. Officer, men, and horses all looked very debonair and well fed. The officer was very condescending towards me, but made a message of the information I gave him, thought it would not be worth while venturing further on to the plain, so rode away back, harness jingling, the sun shining on well-polished accoutrements.

About five o'clock, I judged that we were to be left

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alone for the night, and made my plans accordingly. I sent the following message to B., who was in charge of the men on the right of the village: "We hold on to our present positions unless otherwise ordered. When it is getting dark close your men in a little to form about 7 or 8 pickets. From these pickets send standing patrols out about 150 yards, or to any good observation point within warning distance. Any show of resistance should drive off any enemy patrols. But as far as I can make out the Boche is still east of the canal. Should you be attacked by overwhelming numbers, withdraw fighting in a due westerly direction under your own arrangements. I should do the same in case of need. I suggest you come up to have a look at our position before dark."

But just after dark, I received orders to relieve the Royal Engineers in front of the village. I regretted this order, but had to obey it. We now found ourselves in freshly dug trenches on the flat of the plain, our view to the left and right obstructed by woods.

Included in the orders mentioned was a message to the effect that advance parties of the French would probably arrive that night, and the positions would be shown to them. This message filled us with wild hope; we became almost jaunty.

But the night was very cold and heavily wet with dew. We improved the trenches, and stamped about, flapping our arms in an effort to keep warm. I sat with L., bravest and brightest of my runners, on a waterproof sheet beneath a tree in the centre of our position. We waited for the dawn: it was weird, phantasmagorical. Again the fateful mist. As it cleared a little, the woods near us hung faintly in the whiteness.

At 8 a.m. we began to observe troops retreating in front of us. They came in little groups down the road, or straggled singly over the landscape. The mist gradually lifted. We heard machine-gun fire fairly near, some-

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where on the right. The stragglers informed us that the enemy had crossed the canal in the early dawn, and was advancing in considerable force. We waited patiently. At 9 a.m. the enemy came into touch with our fellows on the left, and here we rebutted him successfully. At 9.30 the troops on our right were reported to be withdrawing. About ten o'clock there happened one of those sudden episodes which would be almost comic with their ludicrous *bouleversement* were they not so tragic in their results. Seemingly straight from the misty sky itself, but in reality from our own guns, descended round after round of shrapnel bursting terrifically just above our heads, and spraying leaden showers upon us. Simultaneously, from the woods on our right, there burst a fierce volley of machine-gun fire, hissing and spluttering among us. We just turned and fled into the shelter of the village buildings. I shouted to my men to make for the position by the quarry. We scuttled through gardens and over walls. By the time we reached the quarry we had recovered our sang-froid. We extended and faced the enemy, who were advancing skilfully over the plain on our left. We on our part were a scrap lot composed of various units. We hastily reorganised into sections. Retreat was inevitable. Then followed a magnificent effort of discipline. A major took charge of the situation, and we began to retire with covering fire, section by section, in perfect alternation.

We were now on a wide expanse of plain, sloping gently westward. We stretched over this—a thin line of men, perhaps a thousand yards long. We were approaching the Nesle-Noyon Canal. When within a few hundred yards of the canal, we closed inwards to cross a bridge (Ramecourt). At the other end of the bridge stood a staff officer, separating the men like sheep as they crossed, first a few to the left, then a few to the right. Here I got separated from the majority of my men, finding myself

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with only fifteen. We were told to proceed along the bank of the canal until we found an unoccupied space, and there dig in.

As we crossed the bridge, we saw for the first time the sky-blue helmets of French troops peeping above a parapet. I think our eyes glistened with expectation of relief.

We went perhaps half a mile along the bank of the canal, and there I halted my attenuated company. The sun was now blazing hotly above our heads. We dropped to the ground, utterly exhausted. Presently some of the men began spontaneously to dig. R., the only officer left with me, also took a pick and joined the men. I began to feel ashamed just then, for I would willingly have died. I took a spade (there was a dump of such things just by us) and began to shovel the earth loosened by R. I seemed to be lifting utterly impossible burdens. My flesh seemed to move uneasily through iron bonds; my leaden lids drooped smartingly upon my eyes.

We dug about three feet deep, and then ceased, incapable of more. At the foot of the bank there was a small pool of water. The enemy was not now in sight, so we plunged our hot faces and hands into its weedy freshness, and took off our boots and socks, and bathed our aching feet.

In the evening, about 5 p.m., a few skirmishing patrols appeared on the horizon. But our artillery was now active and fairly accurate, and machine-guns swept the plain. The patrols retired, without having advanced any distance. A large German aeroplane, with a red belly, floated persistently above our line. We fired hundreds of shots at it, but without effect. T., my servant, nearly blew my head off in his efforts.

We had gathered a lot of sun-scorched hemlock and bedded the bottom of our trenches, and when night came on we posted sentries and huddled down to the

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bedding. The night was clear, and I gazed unblinkingly at the fierce stars above me, my aching flesh forbidding sleep. Later, I must have dozed in a wakeful stupor.

VIII

The next daybreak, that of the 25th, was less misty. Bread and bully-beef had come up during the night, and we fed to get warmth into our bodies. But the sun was soon up, and we began to feel almost cheerful once again. There was no immediate sign of the enemy, and I walked along to the bridge we had crossed the previous day to glean some information of our intentions; but the only plan seemed to be the obvious one of holding on to our positions. I noticed some engineers were there, ready to blow up the bridge if need be.

About 8 a.m. we saw little groups of enemy cavalry appear on the horizon. Through my glasses I could see them consulting maps, pointing, trotting fussily about. Our artillery was planting some kind of scattered barrage on the plain, and an occasional near shot made the horsemen scamper. We watched them rather amusedly till ten o'clock and then we saw signs of infantrymen. They came from the direction of Esmery-Hallon, and at first seemed in fairly dense formation. But they extended as they cut the sky line, and we soon perceived them advancing in open order. As they got nearer, they began to organise short rushes, a section at a time.

We were now well stocked with ammunition—there were piles of it laid about—and as soon as the advancing troops were within anything like range, we began to "pot" them. In fact, the whole thing became like a rifle-gallery entertainment at a fair. But still they came on. Now we could see them quite plainly—could see their legs working like dancing bears, and their great

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square packs bobbing up and down as they ran. Occasionally one dropped.

Immediately in front of our trench, about eight hundred yards away, there was a little copse of perhaps fifty trees. This they reached about eleven o'clock and halted there. If only our flanks held out, I guessed they would never get further, for between the copse and our rifles and Lewis guns there was not a shred of cover; and we were well entrenched, with a wide canal in front of us.

Of course, the artillery was busy all the while: not methodically, but thickly enough to give the day the appearance of a conventional battle. But then the unexpected (really we had no cause longer to regard it as unexpected), the fatal thing happened. A battery of ours shortened its range, and got our position exactly "taped." The shells fell thick and fast, right into our backs. We were, remember, dug in on the top of a bank, perhaps fifteen feet high. All along this bank the shells plunged. Immediately on our right, not fifty yards away, a shell landed cleanly into a trench, and when the smoke cleared there remained nothing, absolutely nothing distinguishable, where a moment ago had been five or six men. We grovelled like frightened, cowed animals. Still the shells fell: and there was no means of stopping them. I glanced distractedly round; men on the right were running under cover of the bank away to the right. Other men on the left were retreating to the left. I resolved to get out of it. Immediately behind us, fifty yards away, was a large crescent-shaped mound, very steep, like a railway embankment, and perhaps sixty feet high. It occurred to me that from there we should command, and command as effectively as ever, the plain in front of us. I made my intention known, and at a given signal we leapt down the bank, and across the intervening fifty yards. We were evidently in sight, for a hail of machine-gun bullets made dusty splutters all round us as we ran.

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But we reached the mound without a casualty, and climbed safely on to it. There I found a few men already in occupation, commanded by a colonel, under whose orders I then placed myself.

The enemy's artillery fire now increased in volume. I saw a cow hit in a field behind us, and fall funnily with four rigid legs poking up at the sky.

At 3.30 we saw the French retiring on the right, about a thousand yards away. They were not running, but did not seem to be performing any methodic withdrawal. We then fell into one of those awful states of doubt and indecision. What was happening? What should we do? There was angry, ominous rifle-fire on our immediate left. About 4 p.m. there was a burst of machine-gun fire on our immediate right. I noticed that the stray bullets were coming over our heads. This meant that the enemy were advancing from the right.

I then saw English troops withdrawing about six hundred yards away on the right—evidently the troops that had been defending the bridge. I did not hear any explosion, and so far as I know the bridge remained intact.

At 4.15 I saw the colonel suddenly leave with his men his position on my immediate left. Although I was within sight—within calling distance—he did not give me an order. I was now alone on the mound with my fifteen men.

I did not wait long. I resolved to act on my own initiative once more. We had now moved off the maps I possessed and might as well be in an unknown wilderness. I resolved to proceed due west, taking the sun as a guide. We moved down the back slope of the mound. At the foot we found a stream or off-flow from the canal, about ten feet wide and apparently very deep. As we hesitated, looking for a convenient crossing, a machine-gun a few hundred yards away opened fire on us. There were a good few trees about which must have obstructed the

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firer's view: the cut twigs, newly budded, fell into the water. We hesitated no longer: we plunged into the stream. The men had to toss their rifles across, many of which landed short and were lost. The sight of these frightened men plunging into the water effected one of those curious stirrings of the unconscious mind that call up some vivid scene of childhood: I saw distinctly the water-rats plunging at dusk into the mill-dam at Thornton-le-Dale, where I had lived as a boy of ten.

The water sucked at my clothes as I met it, and filled my field-boots. They seemed weighted with lead now as I walked, and oozed for hours afterwards.

We came out facing a wide plain, climbing gently westward. Machine-gun and rifle-fire still played about us. We could see a church steeple on the horizon due west, and I told the men to scatter and make for that steeple. Shrapnel was bursting in the sky, too high to be effective. We ran a little way, but soon got too tired. A., a faithful orderly, had stayed with me, and soon we walked over the fields as friends might walk in England. We came across French machine-gunners, who looked at us curiously, asked for news of the situation, but did not seem very perturbed.

We eventually came to the village on the horizon (probably Solente). An officer of the engineers stood by the side of his horse at the cross-roads, smoking a cigarette. He asked me why I was retreating. The question seemed silly: "We shall have to fight every inch of the way back again," he said. "These Frenchmen will never hold them." I went on, too tired to answer.

Here I saw for the first time a new post stuck on the roadside. It had on it an arrow and "Stragglers Post" in bold letters. So I was a straggler. I felt very bitter and full of despair.

I followed the road indicated by the arrow. It was dotted with small parties of men, all dejected and weary.

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We trudged along till we came to the village of Carrepuits. Military police met us at the entrance, and told us to report to the Traffic Control in a house a few hundred yards away. It was now getting dusk. I went into the cottage indicated, and here found an officer, very harassed and bored. Men were collected, and separated into the divisions they belonged to, and then given orders to report to such and such a place. I found a party of about fifty men of my division, and was instructed to take them and report to a divisional headquarters situated in a certain street in Roye.

I've forgotten that walk: it was only about two miles, but our utter dejection induced a kind of unconsciousness in us. It would be between ten and eleven o'clock when we got to Roye. I reported to a staff officer, who sent me off to the town major to get billets. The town major I found distracted, unable to say where I should find a billet. Apparently the town was packed with stragglers. We peered into two great gloomy marquees, floored densely with recumbent men. Meanwhile two other officers joined me with their men, and together we went off to search on our own. We found a magnificent house, quite empty, and here we lodged the men. Some kind of rations had been found. They soon had blazing wood fires going, and seemed happy in a way.

The town major had indicated a hut, where we officers might get rest, and perhaps some food. We went round, tired and aching though we were; we lifted the latch and found ourselves in a glowing room. A stove roared in one corner—and my teeth were chattering with cold, my clothes still being sodden—and a lamp hung from the roof. A large pan of coffee simmered on the stove, and the table was laden with bread, tinned foods, butter; food, food, food. I hadn't had a bite since early morning, and then not much.

I forget, if I ever knew, who or what the two occupants

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were, but they were not stragglers. Roye had been their station for some time. One of them was fat, very fat, with a tight, glossy skin. I don't remember the other. We explained that we would like a billet for the night—anything would do so long as it was warmth. They were sorry: they had no room. Could they spare us some rations? They were sorry: this was all they had got till to-morrow noon. We stood very dejected, sick at our reception. "Come away!" I said. "Before I go away," cried one of my companions, with a bitter voice, "I would just like to tell these blighters what I think of them." Then followed a desperate man's invective. . . . We walked away, back to the men's billet. I looked in at my fellows; most of them were naked, drying their clothes at the fire. Some slept on the floor.

We went upstairs into an empty room. Two of us agreed to make a fire, while the other, the one who had given vent to his feelings, volunteered to go off in search of food. We split up wood we found in the house, and lit a fire. I took off my clothes to dry them, and sat on a bench in my shirt. If I had been asked then what I most desired, besides sleep, I think I would have said: French bread, butter, honey, and hot milky coffee.

The forager soon turned up. God only knows where he got that food from: we did not ask him. But it was French bread, butter, honey, and hot milky coffee in a champagne bottle! We cried out with wonder: I believe we wept. We shared the precious stuff out, eating and drinking with inexpressible zest.

As we supped we related our experiences. I forget their names; I don't think I ever knew them. Were they of the Border Regiment? I'm not sure; but they were Northerners. They had been trapped in a sunken road, with a Boche machine-gun at either end, and Boche calling on them to surrender. I don't think either of them was more than twenty years old: they were fresh

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and boyish, and had been faced with this dilemma. They put it to the vote: there, with death literally staring them in the face, they solemnly called on the men to show hands as to whether they would surrender or make a run for it. They had voted unanimously for the run. Half of them perished in the attempt. But here, a few hours afterwards, were the survivors, chatting over a blazing wood fire, passing a bottle of coffee round, very unperturbed, not in any way self-conscious. We stacked the fire high and stretched ourselves on the floor in front of it, and slept for a few hours.

IX

We were up at six the next morning, the 26th of March, and reporting to the A.P.M., who was reorganising stragglers. We congregated in the Town Square, and I was amazed at the numbers there. The streets were thickly congested with infantrymen from several divisions, with French armoured cars, cavalry, and staff officers. We fell in by divisions, and presently marched off, a column a mile or two in length. Cavalry protected our flanks and rear from surprise.

At Villers-les-Roye I found B., the man who had been separated from me at Ramecourt Bridge. We were glad to be united again, and from there proceeded together. B. had had orders to go to a place called La Neuville, where the first-line transport awaited us. We were now passing through the battlefields of 1916, and everywhere was desolate and ruined. We marched on as far as Hangest-en-Santerre, where we met our battalion cookers loaded with a welcome meal. Just as we had devoured this, and were starting on our way again, we were met by a staff colonel, who, after inquiring who we were, ordered us to turn back and proceed to Folies, where our brigade was reorganising.

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We could but mutely obey, but with dull despair and an aching bitterness. We had never thought since leaving Roye but that we were finally out of the mêlée. To turn back meant, we knew, that we might still be very much in it. We crossed country to Folies, about two miles away, in a blazing sun. There we found the details of the brigade, consisting mostly of returned leave men, already holding a line of trenches. We were told to reinforce them.

Here the second-in-command rejoined the battalion and assumed command. My endurance was broken, and I was ordered down to the transport lines. I pointed out that the men were as weary as I, and had no right to be ordered into action again. It was useless: no man could be spared. But there was not much more for them to bear. Good hot food came up to them again at dusk. The night was warm and restful.

On the morning of the 27th, the enemy had possession of Bouchoir, a village about one mile to the south-east. He commenced to advance during the morning, and a skirmishing fight went on during that day and the next; and during this time the battalion was withdrawn from the line without suffering any serious casualties.

X

But I had gone back with the transport officer on the 26th. I mounted the transport-sergeant's horse, and in a dazed sort of way galloped westward in the dusk. I arrived half-dead at La Neuville, and slept there for twelve hours or more. The next day we went to Braches, and thence on foot to Rouvrel. About here, the country was yet unscathed by war, and very beautiful. On a bank by the roadside, I took *Walden* out of my pocket, where it had been forgotten since the morning of the 21st, and there began to read it. At Rouvrel the rest

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of the battalion rejoined us the next day. On the 29th I set off on horseback with the transport to trek down the valley of the Somme.

When evening came and the hills of Moreuil were faint in the twilight, we were still travelling along the western road. No guns nor any clamour of war could be heard: a great silence filled the cup of misty hills. My weary horse drooped her head as she ambled along, and I, too, was sorrowful. To our north-east lay the squat towers of Amiens, a city in whose defence we had endured hardships until flesh had been defeated, and the brave heart broken. My mind held a vague wonder for her fate—a wonder devoid of hope. I could not believe in the avail of any effort. Then I listened to the rumbling cart, and the quiet voices of the men about me. The first stars were out when we reached Guignemicourt, and there we billeted for the night. In this manner we marched by easy stages down the valley of the Somme, halting finally at Salenelle, a village near Valery, and there we rested four days.

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APPENDIX

A. The scheme, common to the Fifth Army, was a defence by distribution in depth. The original front line was reduced to a line of observation posts, from 100 to 500 yards apart, each consisting of a section of men. These men were not intended to resist: they were to observe and give warning to the main line of defence about 200 to 500 yards behind them. This main line was well dug and well wired. But the battalion fronts were extremely long—as long as 2000 yards—and three companies, perhaps each 100 to 120 strong, became very attenuated along this distance, especially when you had deducted the men on the observation posts. But the line was exceedingly well sited, and, under ordinary circumstances, the machine and Lewis guns, helped by what rifle-fire there was, would have been adequate to cope with any attacking force.

B. Behind the main line of resistance came the battalion redoubt. This was a circular defensive system, perhaps 800 yards in diameter, manned by the company in battalion reserve, battalion headquarters, and a Machine-Gun Corps unit. The construction of these redoubts was not yet completed, especially in the matter of wiring, and I remember how the colonel used to go round raging about the folly of the man who left his back door undefended.

There was one of these redoubts to each battalion, so that between each redoubt there was a gap of some 1000 yards. These gaps were covered by machine-guns, and elaborate barrages were worked out by the artillery to cover the approaches to them.

C. At varying distances behind the front-line system came a second line of redoubts occupied by the brigade in support. These were carefully sited and more or less echeloned with the redoubts 1000 to 3000 yards in front. It was one of these redoubts that we occupied at Roupy, and a detailed description of the defence is given in paragraph *F*.

D. Behind this system of redoubts, resting in near villages and camps, came the brigade in reserve. They could be utilised to reinforce or counter-attack any part of the division's frontage.

E. A line of continuous trenches was in preparation behind the redoubt system, but on our frontage, on the 21st of March,

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this had only been outlined by removing the sods, and by the construction of one or two machine-gun emplacements. We had only a vague idea of what troops were in Army Reserve, and subsequent experience proved these to be negligible.

F. The defences we occupied on the morning of the 21st were distributed as follows: the headquarters were in Stanley Redoubt: round this core was the wired ring of the redoubt, occupied on its eastern side by one company. Towards the enemy in front of the redoubt a short line was occupied by another company detailed to counter-attack should the line in front be broken. This front line was a crescent-shaped irregular line about 1000 yards long, occupied by two companies. The headquarters of each of these companies was about 200 yards behind the front line in a small keep, wired and defended by a small company-reserve. Communication trenches connected the front-line companies with the counter-attack company, and the counter-attack company with the redoubt. The front-line companies were not well connected with the corresponding companies of the battalion on their flanks. There were gaps which could only be covered by visiting patrols.

The system was, according to British standard, fairly well wired, and the redoubt was well stored with S.A.A. and reserve water and rations.

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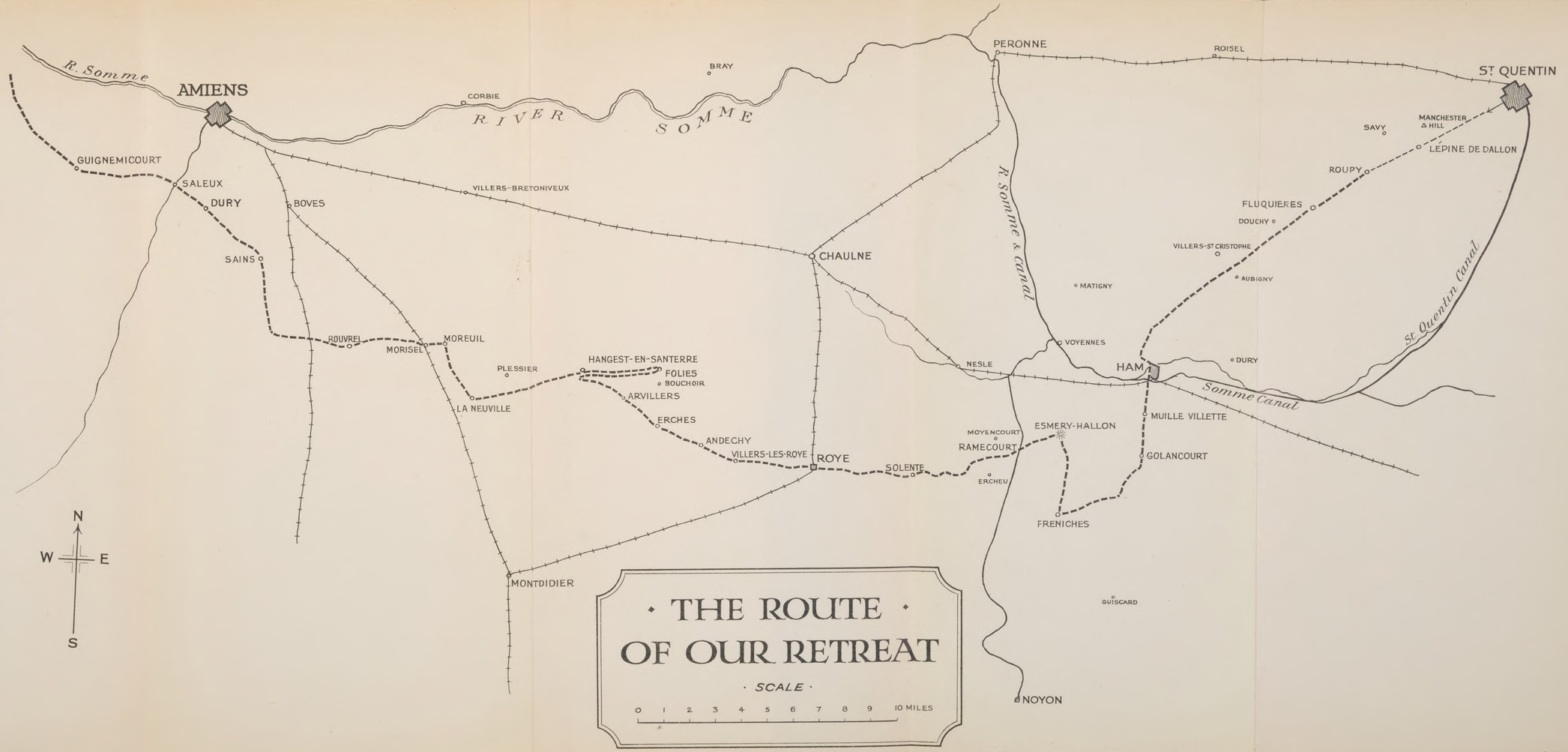
R. Somme
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